

**FRESHMAN ORIENTATION EXPERIENCES AT CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND  
UNIVERSITIES: UNIVERSITY-WIDE AND BUSINESS SCHOOL**

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## Abstract

### **Freshman Orientation Experiences at Christian Colleges and Universities: University-Wide and Business School**

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This study was prompted by the recognition of the significant changes in the environment to provide Business education and the desire to efficiently utilize available resources. For decades universities have been concerned with facilitating student transition from high school to college and in improving retention and graduation rates. The emphasis has been at both the university and the business program level. This study reports on a survey of member schools of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) to determine the types of freshman experiences that are offered in an attempt to improve the chances of student success. The size and mission of these schools also allowed for focus on the integration of faith and learning in their programs. The paper may be of interest to schools seeking to develop specific freshman year seminars and experiences to acclimate new students to the unique realities of the college experience. The report provides information on: types of university wide-freshman year programs; business school freshman programs; and experiences to integrate Biblical faith, scholarship, and service in business programs.

# **Freshman Orientation Experiences at Christian Colleges and Universities: University Wide and Business School**

## **Introduction**

During the past twenty years, there has been an increasingly active effort to assure student success at America's colleges and universities (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989). Faculty are focusing on learning styles, group learning, and other innovative methodologies to aid in the learning process to attempt to assure a successful college experience for all students. Perhaps the most widely-used experience to aid in student success is the development of specific freshman-year seminars and experiences to acclimate new students to the unique realities of the college experience.

Gardner (1992) suggests several reasons for the increased interest in freshman-year programs:

- Increasing student attrition
- An attempt to increase access to more students
- High tuition costs and a decreasing number of students force an emphasis on student recruitment and success
- Increasing variety (nontraditional) of students
- Students are more miscellaneously prepared
- Students and faculty are increasingly looking different in terms of age, values, and socioeconomic status
- Teaching methods and what students are taught is in question

The first freshman seminar in America reportedly began at Lee College in Kentucky in 1882 (Barefoot and Fidler, 1996). During the 1960s, however, the freshman seminar virtually disappeared as universities faced a seller's market and students were left to determine their own success (Gordon, 1991). During the mid-1970s, universities again faced a number of challenges, both fiscal and academic, as the number of traditional-age students decreased, the demographics of the incoming student population shifted, and the high dropout rate between the freshman and sophomore year all generated an increased interest in the transition of students into college life (Barefoot and Fidler, 1996). In 1980, the University of South Carolina formed the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) to help America's administrators and other educators address the issues faced by first-year students. The NRC now publishes a journal and a newsletter on a regular basis, prints monographs relating to freshman-year programs, and convenes regional, national, and international conferences on the issue. Their mailing list includes over 20,000 individuals with an interest in the subject, and their Educational Resources Information Center lists a bibliography of over 4,000 articles and books written on the topic (Henscheid, 2000).

From the NRC's twenty years of experience and observation, Henscheid (2000) offers observations from her and her colleagues as to the types of programs that help first-year students succeed. Selected observations include:

- orientation is offered to all students
- the first semester academic experience integrates them into the institution
- academic advising is a high priority
- all of the exposures demonstrate that freshmen matter as members of the intellectual community
- upperclass students serve as mentors, role models and teachers
- activities exist that help freshmen see why they are in college
- the undergraduate experience is treated as a whole, not a series of unrelated courses
- what freshmen learn and how they learn it reflect the content and processes of the lives they will find outside of the university

In 1988, the NRC conducted a survey of America's 3,100 colleges to determine the breadth and scope of existing freshman programs. Five general models emerged from that survey (Murphy, 1989).

1. ***Success/Survival/Orientation Model*** – This model seeks to improve retention by emphasizing practical content such survival skills and class exercises designed to make the freshman feel more presence on the campus.
2. ***Academic Model*** – This model seeks to develop critical thinking skills through intellectual content and communication skills.
3. ***Professional Model*** – This model introduces students to professional fields, assuming that early professional commitment increases the probability of remaining in college.
4. ***Curricular Model*** – This model combines the efforts of student affairs and academic affairs to establish a specific freshman-year curriculum.
5. ***Eclectic Model*** – This model includes content from the other models and is tailored to fit specific campus needs.

### Research Objectives

With this widespread focus on assisting first-year students to succeed, this study will analyze and categorize the types of freshman experiences that are offered by a group of small, private colleges and universities, specifically those that are members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Almost all of the member schools have fewer than 4,000 undergraduate students, and fewer than 500 business majors. One objective of this study is to determine if small colleges, often with limited resources, are able to focus attention on assuring first-year student success, and determine the nature of the experiences that they offer to aid in the process. It is also interesting to note that attrition rates at private institutions are from 5 to 10 percentage points lower than at public institutions (Henscheid, 2000), and perhaps this decreases the necessity for small, private colleges to place the same emphasis on freshman-year experiences.

This study also will be helpful to institutions considering providing some freshman course or experience, either across the institution or at the business school level, since the various offerings that are reported will be categorized. In addition, those institutions which currently provide some freshman experience may wish to alter their current experiences as a result of successful experiences reported by other schools.

## Research Method

A survey instrument was prepared to gather data about freshman orientation courses or experiences both at the university level and within the business school, along with the motivations for offering or not offering such an experience. Those indicating a required freshman business school course or experience were asked to describe the nature of the course or experience by selecting all that apply from the following types, which were selected based a review of the literature and several conference presentations describing specific experiences at individual business schools:

- early involvement in traditional business courses
- an introduction to business course
- freshman seminar
- professional development or lecture series
- business functions, careers, or development
- use of internet/library resources for research
- information tools course
- simulation experience
- entrepreneurial experience

The questionnaire was sent to the 96 institutions that are members of the CCCU. While large surveys (over 2,400 institutions) have been conducted to gather information about experiences required of freshmen, no survey has been made exclusively focusing on small, private colleges addressing their offerings and attitudes relating to experiences offered to freshmen. In addition, this survey also gathers freshman information relating to business programs, and the specific requirements that business freshmen must complete apart from the remainder of the university. Most of the 96 schools included in the survey also have a similarity of mission in that they focus on the integration of faith and learning throughout their programs.

Because of the uniqueness of mission of most CCCU member institutions to effectively integrate biblical faith with scholarship and service, the survey also requested information about specific experiences required within the business program to aid students in their understanding of this integration.

A total of 45 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 46.9 percent. Thirty-two respondents indicated that their university had a common orientation course or experience for all freshmen, which is 71.1 percent of the responding schools. These results from responding CCCU members virtually mirror those in a national study of over 2,400 institutions in 1994, where 71.8 percent of the responding schools indicated that they offered a freshman seminar course or experience (Barefoot and Fiedler, 1996). The survey also requested information as to whether the business program required a specific course or set of experiences for freshman business majors apart from university-wide requirements. Of the 45 respondents, 19 business programs, or 42 percent, have some required course or experience unique to business students.

## Analysis

### University-Wide Freshman Programs

Based on the information provided to the question asking for a description of university-required freshman experiences, the responses were classified according to the five models suggested by Murphy (1989) which were reviewed earlier. The responses classified by model type are:

<b>STRUCTURE OF FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONSES</b>	<b>PERCENT OF RESPONSES</b>
Success/survival/orientation model	24	75%
Academic model	6	19%
Professional model	0	0%
Curricular model	0	0%
Eclectic model	0	0%
Inadequate information to classify	2	6%

Of those 32 institutions that have a required experience for all university freshmen, seventy-five percent fit into the Success/Survival/Orientation model. The self-reported purposes served by those that fit into this model are:

- transition to college life
- retention
- develop personal identity
- acclimation
- develop study skills
- build community
- fellowship
- recruiting

Murphy (1989) suggests that “Most freshman seminars adopt this model”, and that is the case with CCCU members.

Six of the respondents (19 percent) were categorized into the second model suggested by Murphy (1989), which is the Academic model. The purposes reported for the seminars which fit into this model are:

- considering learning as discovery
- reading and discussion of key Christian ideas about academics and life
- exposure to a Christian worldview, Christian character, and the Christian liberal arts
- exposure to various worldviews

These schools apparently use the freshman seminar to introduce students to their unique missions and the integration of Christian principles and concepts to all of life.

Two respondents indicated that they did have a freshman orientation or experience but did not provide adequate information to enable classification into one of the five models.

None of the freshman programs were classified into the other three models suggested by Murphy. Since the Professional model is a career-oriented model, it is most appropriate within an individual department or discipline, such as business, engineering, nursing, etc., and university-wide freshman experiences would not likely use this model. One respondent did indicate, however, that students are grouped by discipline within the freshman orientation program, primarily to become acquainted with others with a similar major, and to obtain a common orientation to their selected field of study. The Curricular and Eclectic models are more encompassing models, and did not fit any of the descriptions provided from the survey.

The survey also requested information as to the reason that the university does not require a specific set of freshman year experiences. Almost all of the responses to this question related to the difficulty in providing the hours within the curriculum to be able to offer such experiences, and whether the benefits would exceed the cost from a curriculum perspective. Some programs have service experiences throughout the university over the entirety of the undergraduate program that provide benefits similar to a specific freshman year program.

### Business School Freshman Programs

While 71.1 percent of the universities responding offered a specific freshman experience, only 19 (42.2 percent) of the respondent schools require some specific freshman orientation or experience within the business program. The categories of the required business experiences are:

<b>NATURE OF BUSINESS EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONSES*</b>	<b>PERCENT OF 19 RESPONSES</b>
Introduction to Business course	14	74%
Information tools course	11	58%
Use of internet/research resources	10	53%
Early involvement in traditional business courses	9	47%
Freshman seminar – orientation	7	37%
Business functions/careers	6	32%
Simulation experience	1	5%
Entrepreneurial experience	1	5%

\*Many of the responses contained multiple experiences

As is evident from the total number of responses for each business experience, most of the freshman business experiences include a wide variety of exposures. Even those programs that offer the traditional Introduction to Business course include a number of other experiences to supplement the course. The one program that reported using simulation experiences actually uses experiential exercises within the Introduction to Business course, which would not generally be considered a typical simulation.

The responses to the question regarding the motivation for offering a freshman business experience were varied, but generally can be categorized into the following reasons:

- recruit and retain business majors
- introduce students to business as a life calling
- provide foundational concepts to business majors
- establish networking among students and faculty

A number of programs use this freshman business course to assist students in their decision as to whether the business program is the correct area of major for them.

Those programs that do not offer a freshman business course or experience cite the lack of time in the program to provide such an offering, and that the university freshman experience already provides substantial benefits in orientation and retention.

### Bucknell University Freshman Experience

Although not a part of the CCCU survey, Bucknell University offers a unique experience to all of their second-semester freshmen or first-semester sophomore students, a course titled Management 101 (MG 101). The course is a collaborative, experiential organization and management project course about how, when and why people work together to get things done.

In MG 101, students create and manage companies. They establish their own service missions and business objectives, design and staff their organizations, develop financial and operational control systems and procedures for organizational, group, and individual performance evaluations, implement service and business projects, and provide a final public report at the end of the semester. Management 101 project companies are not “simulations” or “games.” They operate with budgets of \$ 3,000 to \$ 5,000 each; they deliver real services to clients and develop and sell real products and services to customers.  
(Management 101)

Students work together in teams of 30 to 40 students, and since they operate an actual business, all of the facets of managing a business are brought to bear within the group: planning, organizing, managing, financing, scheduling, marketing, controlling and reporting. Bucknell has been offering this program for almost twenty years, and is a model for other universities that now offer similar programs. This entrepreneurial experience engages students early in their college years, and provides a model of organizational activities that apply in most situations in life.

### Experiences to Integrate Biblical faith, scholarship and service in Business Programs

The survey requested information about specific experiences within the business program to effectively integrate biblical faith, scholarship and service. Twenty-nine respondents reported such experiences, as summarized in the following table.

<b>NATURE OF EXPERIENCES</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONSES*</b>	<b>PERCENT OF 29 RESPONSES</b>
Integration into each class	17	59%
Business seminar course	5	17%
Business ethics course	5	17%
Service projects	4	14%
Religion courses	4	14%
Student retreat	1	3%
Chapel services	1	3%
Christian faith and life class	1	3%

\*Many of the responses contained multiple experiences

No unusual aspects of these experiences were reported as a part of the survey information gathered.

### **Summary**

This research investigates the prevalence and composition of freshman courses and experiences at small, private colleges and universities who are members of the CCCU, as well as motivations for offering or not offering such experiences. In addition, this research investigates the prevalence of, composition of, and motivations for offering or not offering such freshman courses and experiences within the business programs of these colleges and universities. The findings are based on the analysis of survey respondents and interpretation of the information provided.

Nationally, there is an increasing interest in providing programs that serve to increase the probability of success for students entering college, and many schools use programs that focus on first-year students to aid them in the transition to college. Various types of programs are suggested in the literature, and this research examined the prevalence of each type of program at CCCU member institutions. In addition, a number of institutions offer freshman-year experiences specifically for business students, and this research described the types of experiences provided for these students.

This study may be helpful to those institutions examining their freshman-level programs by offering insight into the types of experiences provided by other small, private colleges.

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